

## **Standing Up for Equality; Paper in Hand**

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I did not yield to the wishes here expressed, and in consequence have been persecuted ever since. But I have kept a good conscience in the matter, and that repays me for all I have suffered, or can suffer. I have sworn eternal opposition to slavery, and by the blessing of God, I will never go back.

Elijah P. Lovejoy, October 24, 1837

Abolitionists are a popular topic, but there are many aspects that are uncovered. Everyone has learned about Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, but less know the importance of the *Alton Observer*, a liberal anti-slavery newspaper started by Elijah Lovejoy in 1836 after he moved the *St. Louis Observer* to Alton, Illinois. Lovejoy lived only thirty-five years, but that was plenty of time for him to leave a permanent mark on our society. Both papers contributed to Lovejoy's dedication to freedom, but the more influential were the events that ensued in Alton, Illinois. Lovejoy wrote many articles like "What are the doctrines of anti-slavery men?" which was written to combat the growing league of slavery supporters that strongly opposed Lovejoy. Elijah Lovejoy's writings and dedication to his cause helped the anti-slavery movement to spread throughout Illinois. His journalism had a permanent influence on Illinois, and the entire country.

Though it may seem like there were not, there was a lot of abolitionists in the country in the 1800s. Though Elijah Lovejoy did not recognize himself as an abolitionist,

he was. His newspaper, the *St. Louis Observer*, was a religious newspaper that contained many articles denouncing slavery as an acceptable practice. The most influential article that he wrote was “Awful Burning and Savage Barbarity.” It was released in the May 5, 1836, issue of the *Observer* and attacked a mob that burned Francis Macintosh, a free black man. Macintosh had, the day previously, killed one man and wounded another who was trying to take him to jail for “disturbing the peace.” That night, a mob broke into the jail and dragged Macintosh to a tree where he was tied up and burned alive. In the article, Lovejoy addressed the barbarity of the mob’s actions. In describing the actions of the mob, he said, “a hardened wretch certainly, and one deserved to die, but not *thus* to die-it forces him from beneath the [reign] of our Constitution and Laws, hurries him to the stake and burns him alive.” This equalitarian attitude was common in Lovejoy’s writings and speaking. This mob was tried by Judge Lawless, who condemned Lovejoy for Macintosh’s actions, saying that liberal newspapers like Lovejoy’s *Observer* “fantasize the Negro and excite him against the white man.” Lawless tried to condemn Lovejoy and totally ignore the mob’s injustice. He asked the jury to consider things “to punish, if they cannot prevent, those exhortations to rebellion.” In response to this the Grand Jury acquitted members of the mob. The ensuing conflict with Judge Lawless pushed his newspaper to national importance. It was during this time that Lovejoy decided to move to Alton.

No matter the other issues going on, Lovejoy always stuck to his guns on the issue of slavery. After one reader wrote to him complaining about the amount of anti-slavery material in the *Observer*, Lovejoy responded,

If I could hold my peace on this subject with a clear conscience, I would most assuredly do it. My course has cost me many a valued friend. But I cannot, and I am sure you do not ask or wish a Christian to connive at what he believes to be a sin, for the sake of popularity.

Opposition to emancipation became more common. There were mobs all over the country. As the public opposition to Lovejoy grew, he became bolder. In the February 9, 1837 issue, he took his strongest stand ever. He published “What is Slavery?” in the *Observer* and an article in which he said “Two million and a half of our fellow creatures are groaning in bondage, crushed to the earth, deprived of rights which their Maker gave them.” He said that not only was slavery a sin, but those who did not oppose slavery or move against it were fighting against God.

Lovejoy was killed by a mob on November 7, 1837. He remained in a warehouse with his friends defending his new printing press. When he went outside to prevent them from burning the building down, he was shot five times. Lovejoy is now considered the first martyr for freedom of speech. President Herbert Hoover said “Elijah Parish Lovejoy was killed while defending free speech and free press in the United States. Since his martyrdom no man has openly challenged free speech and free press in America.” Lovejoy’s death is perhaps one of the greater influences to the anti-slavery movement, along with events like the publishing of the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “Within weeks after Lovejoy’s death, membership in antislavery societies multiplied, and the anti-slavery sentiment increased,” according to Paul Simon.

Lovejoy once said “There is no scarcity of people who are oppressed. There is only a scarcity of men and women with eyes clear enough to see or hearts big enough to act.” It is his actions in the world of journalism that proves him to be one of these people. His strong felt articles along with his controversial actions contributed to the beginning of the abolitionist movement, which shaped the future of our country. [From *Alton Observer* 7 Nov. 1837. <<http://www.altonweb.com/history/lovejoy/aol.html>>. (Sept. 6, 2007); Elijah P. Lovejoy, “Awful Murder and Savage Barbarity.” *St. Louis Observer* May 5, 1836; Paul Simon, *Freedom’s Champion*; and Henry Tanner, *The Martyrdom of Lovejoy*.]